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MEDICINE IN THE ROMAN ARMY

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[NOTE: The best and most recent work on Roman medicine is an article by Salomon Reinach in the Daremberg-Saglio-Pottier *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines* under the title "Medicus." It is fairly complete and gives references to all sources. Brief discussions by Friedländer in his *Sittengeschichte Roms* and by Brunner in *Die Spuren der römischen Aerzte auf dem Boden der Schweiz* were found helpful, particularly for information on the physician Galen, whose writings were not available. The various articles by Dr. René Briau are excellent, although they should be used carefully. The work entitled *Du service de santé militaire chez les Romains*, in which he has collected many inscriptions, could not be obtained in preparing these papers; his second article, *L'assistance médicale chez les Romains* and those in the *Revue archéologique*, 1885, on "L'introduction de la médecine dans le Latium et à Rome" were of great assistance.]

It is remarkable that so important a phase of a well-developed military system as an organized medical service should have been neglected in the Roman state until the time of Augustus. How were the sick and wounded cared for in the centuries preceding the imperial era? Barely enough information on this point can be gleaned from the ancient writers to enable us to bridge over the ages between semi-barbarism and the splendid civilization of the Augustan age.

The slightest consideration leads to the conclusion that the men were largely self-reliant, that in case of need all were ready to aid one another. Naturally this would be the first and only means of relief and would persist long after a regular system had been evolved. Among any primitive, warlike people, the fighters must be able to care for their own wounds; and the rank and file soon acquire a knowledge of the first principles of surgery. The Roman soldiers seem to have been equipped for emergencies with bandages; for in one instance, unwilling to engage in battle, in order to feign disability they used their bandages upon uninjured limbs.¹ Whether or not there was a corps of soldiers deputized to care for the wounded is not known. Dionysius² tells us that those unable to continue the

¹ Dionysius Halicarnassus, *Antiq. Rom.*, ix. 50.

² Dion. Hal., *op. cit.*, viii. 65.

fight dropped to the rear; this was also the custom in the time of Caesar, who recounts a critical contest in which the wounded were not given permission to retire to the rear for rest and assistance.¹ It is not improbable that there was in the rearguard a group charged with this duty, and we may even conjecture that the weak and convalescent were utilized for the purpose. From the earliest times the army relied upon the civilian class for assistance, and the great houses in and about Rome were accustomed to receive the wounded soldiers. The consul Marcus Fabius, after a severe engagement with the Etrurians in 437 B.C., distributed the wounded among the patrician families.² The greater number were placed with the Fabii themselves, and the historian assures us that by none were they treated more attentively. In the provinces this custom of quartering the wounded upon the inhabitants of the district was followed as late as the time of Alexander Severus.³ How early the patrician and wealthy families began to maintain in their populous households slaves trained in medicine we do not know; but slave physicians were common in the third century B.C. and probably existed much earlier. The care received by ailing soldiers fortunate enough to be quartered in one of these families was therefore no doubt the best obtainable. That this lack of system was on the whole very unfortunate is at once apparent, and Livy tells us that after the battle of Sutrium many more soldiers died from their wounds than had fallen in the fight.⁴

In Caesar's time are found the first traces of systematic care for the comfort of the wounded. When expedient, Caesar delayed his march for their benefit;⁵ if circumstances forced him to leave them behind he established camps or garrisons⁶ for their accommodation, or quartered them upon the inhabitants. The wounded were conveyed to the camp or village in wagons;⁷ the officers were sometimes accommodated with litters.⁸ Although Caesar, who bestowed upon physicians the civil rights hitherto denied them,⁹ does not mention physicians in his commentaries, he unquestionably maintained one on

¹ *De bel. Gal.*, iii. 4, 4.

² Livy, ii. 47, 12.

³ Lampridus, *Alex. Sev.*, 47.

⁴ Livy, ix. 32, 12.

⁵ *De bel. civ.*, iii. 75, 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, viii. 48, 7.

⁷ Caesar, *De bel. Af.*, xxi. 3.

⁸ *De bel. Hisp.*, xxxviii. 2.

⁹ Suetonius, *Jul. Caes.*, 42.

the field; for his contemporaries, Cato Minor¹ and Pansa² were provided with freedmen as physicians. Cicero marvels at the unseemly outcries often made by the raw recruits when wounded, whereas the seasoned veteran calmly looks about for a physician to dress his wounds.³ The first official medical attendants on the battle-field, then, were the personal attendants of the commanders. Cicero's remarks signify that their exertions were not confined to the praetorian tent but were extended to the ranks. The sympathy and consideration for the wounded displayed by Caesar confirms this statement. However limited must have been the aid that one such physician could render an army, his presence marks an important step in advance, since it led the way to the appointment of physicians for general service.

The need of permanent physicians for military service became so evident that when the military system was reorganized under Augustus and a standing army with a permanent camp established, appointments of *medici* were made to each division of the army. Numerous inscriptions have been found which establish the titles *medicus legionis*, and *medicus cohortis*.⁴ The following is an example of these inscriptions. It was found near Vindonissa, where the famous twenty-first legion was once encamped, and dates from the first century after Christ.⁵

TI CLAUDIO H̄MNO
MEDICO LEG · XXI
CLAUDIAE QUIETAE EIVS
ATTICVS PATRONVS⁶

The number of physicians assigned to a cohort or legion has not been determined, since there are no data at hand whereby the point may

¹ Plutarch, *Cato Minor*, 70.

² Suetonius, *Octav.*, 11.

³ *Tusc. disput.*, ii. 16.

⁴ Collected by Dr. René Briau, *Du service de santé militaire chez les Romains*.

⁵ Brunner, *Die Spuren der röm. Aertze auf dem Boden der Schweiz*, p. 20.

⁶ "To Tiberius Claudius Hymnus, physician of the 21st legion, and to Claudia Quieta (his wife), his patron, Atticus, (has dedicated this tablet)."

be settled. The military organization from the reign of Augustus was so complete that it is safe to assume that the service was fairly efficient. There is no reason to believe that any physician in the army at this time ranked above another. Probably each was enrolled in a century of soldiers with a definite portion of the army under his care and was included in the *principales*. On the column of Trajan is depicted a scene in which several wounded soldiers are receiving assistance; limbs are being bandaged by men whose dress and accouterments differ in no respect from that of the suffering soldiers. Since the service was well organized in Trajan's time, it is probable that we have here the likenesses of *medici cohortis* in performance of their duties. The duties would include relief of distress on the field and care of those confined to their tents by illness or injury. The two fleets established by Augustus for coast defense at Messina and Ravenna were provided with physicians. There was probably one for each trireme, and the larger vessels may have carried more.¹

Tents were set aside for the wounded in the time of the later republic. This was the first step toward the establishment of *vale-tudinaria*, or field hospitals. The *valetudinarium* in the so-called "flying military camp" was simply a group of tents reserved for soldiers suffering from grievous wounds. No doubt those whose wounds were slight were allowed to remain in their own quarters. There is no mention of the *valetudinaria* in the descriptions of Roman camps prior to the reign of Trajan. In Trajan's reign a field surveyor named Hyginus wrote an elaborate, rather technical description of a flying camp.² He is the first writer to mention the *valetudinarium* of the field, and tells us that it was situated as far as possible from the *veterinarium* and *fabricia* in order that the invalids might not be disturbed by noise. A *valetudinarium* was usually arranged to accommodate two hundred men. It was in charge of the *medicus castrensis* or *castrorum*.³ This office was quite distinct, apparently, from that of the *medici legionis* or *cohortis*, whose attention would be confined to work in the field. The administration of the *valetudinarium*

¹ Briau: *Du service de santé mil.*

² Hyginus Gromaticus, *De munitionibus castrorum*, 8 ff.

³ Cagnat, *Armée rom. d'Afrique*, p. 184.

was in charge of the *optationes valetudinarii*,¹ while general supervision lay with the prefect of the camp.

In a flying camp the *valetudinarium* was necessarily hastily constructed and was not elaborately equipped. But as the tent reserved for the wounded in Cicero's time was the prototype of the *valetudinarium*, so the *valetudinarium* developed from a group of tents under the charge of physicians, into the well-equipped military hospital of a permanent character. In 1893 the ruins of one of these establishments were discovered on a Roman military road near Baden, Switzerland, not far from ancient Vindonissa, the seat of Roman legions. The ruins disclose the remains of an imposing façade, a colonnaded portico, and traces of walls outlining as many as fourteen rooms. The larger may have been subdivided into smaller compartments, for fragments of wooden partitions have been found. Innumerable surgical instruments were uncovered, as well as several small boxes enclosing drugs so well preserved that their identity has been established. One small room contained balances such as are used by pharmacists; various other articles point indubitably to the use of the building as a hospital. It is conjectured that the structure dates from the second century A.D. The existence of such a building, so equipped, indicates the high point to which the medical service in the Roman army had been advanced. Little more could have been done by the state for the care of suffering soldiers. The salubrious climate of Baden, the proximity of the baths, the splendid equipment of the building, combined to make it a monument to the medical service in the Roman army.²

The rapid development under the Empire was due largely to a sense of expediency and of economy, but also to the sympathy of the great commanders and emperors for their men. Germanicus³ and Tiberius⁴ visited and encouraged the sick; Pliny extols Trajan for his sympathy;⁵ Dio Cassius tells us that Trajan tore up his own garments for bandages when nothing else was at hand.⁶ Hadrian was scarcely less considerate, for he often visited the wounded

¹ *Digest*, L, 6, 13.

² Anonymous pamphlet, *Un hôpital militaire romain* (Zurich).

³ Tacitus, *Annales*, I, 71, 5.

⁵ *Paneg. in Traj.*, 13.

⁴ *Val. Paterc.*, ii. 114.

⁶ Dio Cassius, 68, 8.

soldiers "in suis hospitiiis."¹ It was the custom of Alexander Severus regularly to make the rounds of the tents of the injured, even to the farthest ranks of the army. He procured for their use in following the army, chariots, *carpenta*, "*milites se magis servare, quam se ipsum, quod salus publica in his esset.*"² When he thought it advisable, he placed the sick in households in the neighborhood; the owners were recompensed for their trouble and expense, whether the soldiers recovered or not. Aurelian, as tribune, forbade physicians attached to the army to receive money from the soldiers,³ a measure calculated to secure equal attention to all who needed care.

Of the skill and knowledge of these physicians we know very little. The variety and nature of the surgical instruments discovered in Roman remains indicate a good knowledge of surgery. Galen, however, Rome's greatest medical light, and body physician to Marcus Aurelius, far in advance of most physicians of his day, criticizes those who accompanied Aurelius on his campaign against the Marcomanni for their ignorance of anatomy. Modern authorities agree that Galen's knowledge of human anatomy was extremely limited and inexact. Those whom he reproached, therefore, must have been inferior indeed, provided that his remarks are not tinged with professional jealousy.

On the whole, the medical knowledge of the time was scarcely more than rudimentary. Surgical skill was far in advance of it, and especially in the army, where the practical application facilitated progress. The Roman genius for organization leads us to believe that the advance in the mechanism of a sanitary system in the army far exceeded the growth of knowledge of medicine itself.

¹ Spartianus, *Hist. Aug. Script.*, x, 12.

² Lamprid., *Alex. Sev.*, 47.

³ Vospic., *Aurel.*, 7.